

Lower-Division 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Literary Research

Symbolism in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

By Jeff Tucker

(Written for Mrs. Culpepper's English 102 Course)

Many novels cannot be fully understood and appreciated if only read for face value, and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is no exception. The abundant use of symbolism in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is of such significance that it "proclaims itself in the very title of the novel" (Trowbridge par. 1). If the symbolism in this novel is studied closely, there should be no astonishment in learning that *The Catcher in the Rye* took approximately ten years to write and was originally twice its present length. J.D. Salinger uses copious amounts of symbolism in his novel to accurately convey the feelings of his main character, Holden, and, in essence, to reveal information pertaining to human sentiment. Many of these symbols contain irony, multiple meanings, and varying degrees of complexity. Through the comprehension of Salinger's unique symbolism, however, *The Catcher in the Rye* can be truly understood and appreciated.

The character of Holden Caulfield is a powerful symbol himself which represents people as they truly are. Holden can be related to by anyone; he is occasionally silly, irritating, thoughtless, and irresponsible. He judges others without a second thought and builds his perception of people according to the things that he deems to be "phony." Holden Caulfield is representative of idealism. He sees the difference between what is and what ought to be and is bothered enough by this to take action. The name "Holden" can be phonetically interpreted as meaning "hold on," but what is it that Holden is holding on to? *The Catcher in the Rye* is the tale, from Holden's perspective, of the three days following his removal from his prep school, Pencey, and the wisdom that comes during his venture.

One of the first encounters with symbolism in the novel comes in the form of ducks in South Central Park. Throughout the course of Holden's three day quest for truth, he frequently asks the people he encounters about the ducks in the lagoon in South Central Park. The ducks are first brought to the reader's attention while Holden is visiting his teacher, Mr. Spencer, regarding his removal from Pencey. While conversing with Mr. Spencer, however, Holden's mind drifts elsewhere. His mind drifts back to New York as he wonders to himself if the lagoon in Central Park is frozen over, and if so, where do the ducks go? A direct parallel can be drawn from the ducks in the lagoon to Holden's present situation. He is mandated to leave Pencey, but has no idea where he belongs after leaving. Just like the ducks in the lagoon, "Holden is essentially homeless, frozen out" (Trowbridge par. 1). Holden's life has not been filled with an abundance of stability and now what little he had is gone, albeit due to faults of his own, and he sees an unsure and hazy future. Holden inquires about the state of the ducks to the driver of the first cab he catches in New York, and the driver believes that he is kidding. Later on, he asks another cab driver if somebody came around "in a truck or something to take them away" or if they flew away "by themselves" (Salinger 81-82). Knowing what happens to these ducks, knowing that they are safe and secure even though the lagoon is frozen would provide Holden with a sense of comfort about his current state of affairs. What

seems to be a ridiculous and meaningless question to the people Holden encounters is in reality a mere metaphor for what he truly wants to know. In essence, Holden is less concerned with the fate of the ducks when the lagoon is frozen than he is of himself when he no longer has a place to go. Holden discovers in the future that the ducks are indeed gone when he goes to Central Park.

Holden's red hunting hat is present in various situations throughout the course of the novel and holds many symbolic qualities. The hat is bought in New York on the morning preceding Holden's departure from Pencey. It is described as one of those hats "with one of those very, very long peaks" that Holden likes to swing to the back (Salinger 17). The hat also has earflaps, which coupled with the long peak makes for a sufficient façade in uneasy circumstances. Holden's late brother, Allie, had red hair. This also makes the red hunting hat significant. When Holden pulls on his red hunting hat he "assumes Allie's red hair" onto himself, which aids him in feeling better (Miller par. 10). Since Holden is quite the exhibitionist who enjoys attracting attention to himself, the red hunting hat also serves as a symbol for his uniqueness which he believes sets him apart from the other people that he encounters and deems "phony." Holden first puts his hat on upon his return from the home of his teacher, Mr. Spencer, where he is chastised for his poor performance in his academic endeavors. Holden periodically puts this hat on during the novel when situations occur that make him feel nervous or uncomfortable. After his fight with Stradlater in the dormitory, the first thing Holden does is attempt to find his hunting hat before he looks at his mangled face in the mirror. Then while Holden is crying upon leaving Pencey, he once again places his hunting hat upon his head before saying his boorish goodbye to the corridor at the top of his voice. Holden is also wearing this hat when he visits the lagoon in Central Park South and realizes that the ducks are indeed not there. The red hunting hat is symbolic for comfort, but it is essentially for Holden's own protection. Whenever Holden is confronted with a difficulty or dilemma, he places the red hunting hat upon his head and is provided with a sense of security. This sense of protection coming from the hat goes unnoticed by Holden, yet unconsciously helps him get through the various situations at hand. Holden uses this red hunting hat as support as he resists the things he deems corrupt from the adult world, as he tries to retain his innocence.

Holden's younger sister Phoebe is among the few characters in the book that he does not seem to have extreme difficulty coping with. He is constantly referring to her as "old Phoebe" and noting things such as how "you never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life" (Salinger 67). Phoebe serves Holden as an ideal of innocence and honesty in contrast to the corruption and falsity of the adult world (Svogun 110). Phoebe is fundamental in this tale as she serves as Holden's symbol for the trait he seems to treasure most: innocence. She remains virtually untouched by the things that Holden has been resisting throughout his life that have threatened to taint his sense of identity. Holden lost most of his sense of innocence with the death of his brother, Allie, and lying and avoidance have become the norm in his life, rather than the innocent invincibility of childhood (Privitera 204). It is as if Holden is keeping his innocence vicariously through his younger sister. Irony is heavily involved in the symbolism of Phoebe as innocence. Although she is symbolic of innocence for Holden, the reader sees that she is a symbol for realism. Despite her fantasies and extravagant imagination, Phoebe Caulfield "is in touch with the real world" (Foran 978). She is the character that must convince Holden to be responsible and not

to leave for the west. Phoebe chastises him for getting kicked out of Pencey and also helps him deal with the death of their older brother Allie. She does her best to persuade him to think of things in the world that he actually likes and does not frown upon. She also scolds him about his constant use of profane language. Phoebe's realistic attitude towards life makes her become an "under-aged, under-sized mother figure" to Holden on his venture (Miller par. 30).

The most powerful symbol used in this novel is the symbol of the catcher in the rye. The concept of the catcher in the rye is first brought to Holden's attention on Sunday morning as he is walking behind a family with a small child who is singing and humming while walking in the street. Holden gets closer to the child to make out the song he is singing. Listening to him, Holden overhears a song that he remembers from his past. The child is repeatedly singing the lyrics: "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" (Salinger 115). Hearing the boy singing this has a strong effect on Holden leading him to feel "not so depressed anymore" (Salinger 115). When Holden returns home that night to see Phoebe, this concept is brought up again. Phoebe questions Holden on what he wants to do as an adult. She suggests different things such as a career as a scientist or a lawyer like their father. The idea of being a lawyer does not appeal to Holden, but one thing about it does attract him. He believes that being a lawyer suffices if "you go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time" (Salinger 172). As he sits and speaks with Phoebe, his mind, like it tends to do, drifts elsewhere. Holden states that he is thinking of something else, "something crazy" (Salinger 172). He asks Phoebe if she knew the song that the younger boy was singing earlier that day. Holden repeats the lyrics to her and, because of Phoebe's correction, realizes that he and the boy were both mistaken on the lyrics. Phoebe tells Holden the actual lyrics are "if a body *meet* a body coming through the rye" (Salinger 173). Disregarding his mistake, he tells Phoebe of what he really dreams to be. In his fantasy he describes a big field of rye near the edge of a cliff, and nobody is around except him and thousands of little kids. Holden says that he would stand on the edge of this cliff, and if the kids were running and did not look where they were going, he would "have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them" (Salinger 173) and that is what he would do all day, he would just be "the catcher in the rye" (Salinger 173). He tells Phoebe that he knows it is crazy, but it is the only thing he would really enjoy being. Being a "catcher in the rye" is symbolic for being a defender or savior of the innocent (Takeuchi 164). A parallel can once again be drawn to Holden's late brother Allie because Holden was not able to catch him. This leads to Holden feeling as if he "should have saved Allie and in the future will save children abused by adults" (Miller par. 33). Holden's concept of being a catcher is shown brilliantly throughout the novel as Holden attempts to "catch" people he comes into contact with during his venture. While in the hotel in New York, Holden does not have intercourse with the prostitute, Sunny, but instead tries to have a conversation with her. He erases the profane "fuck you" off the wall of Phoebe's school to prevent the children from seeing it. He does all that he can to prevent the people he encounters from going off the cliff in his fantasy. This cliff is symbolic to Holden of "the cliff of adolescence over which children will plunge into the evil of adulthood unless stopped" (Trowbridge par. 11). Once again irony is brought into the symbolic nature of this novel in that, if Holden is to save others; it means him having to leave his own innocence to protect the innocence of others. Irony is also embedded in these symbols in the

misunderstanding of the song *Comin' Through the Rye* by Holden. *Catching* a body coming through the rye alludes to the protection Holden wants to provide. *Meeting*, however, signifies losing innocence. In addition to wanting to be a catcher himself, Holden, who is not close with his own father, searches to find a “catcher-father” in his former teacher, Mr. Antolini (Baumbach 463). Mr. Antolini fails Holden by attempting to pull what is left of his innocence out of the field of rye by making an advancement on him in his sleep. The inability for Mr. Antolini to catch Holden from falling foreshadows what is to become of Holden’s dream of being a catcher in the rye at the end of the novel.

All of Salinger’s symbolism comes to fruition at the conclusion of the novel when it is realized that all of the symbols are connected. Holden’s question concerning the possibility of someone coming to take the ducks away when the lagoon freezes over can actually be inferred as meaning “whether there is a benevolent authority that takes care of the ducks,” or in Holden’s mind, a catcher (Baumbach 467). Upon leaving his home, he gives Phoebe his red hunting hat. By doing so he gives his source of protection to his ideal of innocence in a subtle attempt to catch her. Irony comes into play for the final time as it is not Holden that catches Phoebe, but rather Phoebe that catches Holden. When Holden meets Phoebe at the museum, she has her bags packed and is determined to go with him. He insists that she stay in New York, and she becomes irrevocably upset. She throws his hunting hat in his face and gives him the cold shoulder as they make their way through the zoo and to the park. Holden breaks and tells Phoebe he is not going to go anywhere and that he intends on coming back home. At the park they come upon a carousel they have ridden in their past, which stirs memories within Holden. Phoebe’s avoidance of speaking to Holden fades as he convinces her to take a ride. This carousel in the novel represents eternal youth. The ride has not changed since Holden was a child and still plays “that same song.” (Salinger 210). A turning point in the novel comes as Phoebe asks Holden if he wants to ride with her, and he, without any reluctance, turns her down. Through this action, Holden officially outgrows his childhood and indirectly steers himself toward becoming an adult. Holden has a defining epiphany as he watches Phoebe ride happily on the carousel. As he watches Phoebe reach for the gold ring as she goes round and round, he is “sort of afraid she’d fall,” but he refuses to say anything (Salinger 211). Holden, in the novel’s defining lines, finally realizes that “if they (kids) want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them” (Salinger 211). Through this, Holden sees that he can never be the catcher in the rye. The loss of childhood can never be prevented, but innocence can always remain in some form. The love Holden has for his ten-year-old sister Phoebe saves him. She becomes his “redemptive grace” (Baumbach 471).

Symbolism is an integral part of J.D. Salinger’s famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is clear through an extensive look at the symbols he uses and their meanings that there is much more to this book than people would comprehend by reading it for face value. Through using Holden as a representative of human sentiment and using simple symbols to illustrate complex agendas, Salinger successfully creates a novel that is rightly considered one of the great works of literature accepted into the literary canon of the 20th and 21st centuries. Behind the curtains of red hats, disappearing ducks, little sisters, and teenage fantasies, Salinger reveals the needs

of protection, the fear of being alone, the importance of innocence, and the line between idealism and realism. Grasping these symbolic concepts is pivotal for the true understanding and appreciation of J.D. Salinger's famous work: *The Catcher in the Rye*.

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